Dear Readers,

This is the revised draft of my first essay, titled “Sharing Stories and Avoiding Authority: Wallace’s Rhetorical Strategy.” In my essay, I discuss the idea, presented by Jim Corder in his paper “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love,” that our arguments should be loving – and that part of crafting a loving argument is sharing one’s personal narrative.

I think most readers would agree that the argument presented in “Consider the Lobster,” by David Foster Wallace, is a loving one. Wallace is compassionate and empathetic towards his audience, exhibiting the same kind of fair-mindedness that Corder recommends in his paper. However, after rereading Wallace’s essay, I was struck by how little personal narrative appeared in it. Wallace was supposedly telling us about his personal experience at the Main Lobster Festival, but I felt at the end that there were certain times when he actually refrained from describing the personal aspects of his story – when he talks about the actual process of boiling the lobster, for example. I wondered if it was possible to reconcile this observation with Corder’s claim, or if Corder’s claim needed to be modified in some way.

When I thought about it, the idea occurred to me that Wallace probably avoided sharing personal details because he didn’t want to appear self-righteous. That was a big part of his whole ethos; he told the reader explicitly that he was worried about coming across as preachy. If two people have both gone through the experience of boiling a lobster first-hand, and one comes away with the conclusion that it is wrong, while the other decides it’s morally acceptable, all they’ve really discovered is that they differ in the way they react to situations – and the one who thought it was all right will most likely perceive the other as holier-than-thou. Thus, sharing that story from a personal perspective would be an unwise decision on Wallace’s part, since it would seem to be giving him the moral high ground in comparison to the reader. This is also backed up by one of Corder’s other points, which is that we as arguers should abandon our authoritative stances.

With that in mind, I decided to modify Corder’s claim slightly: we should share personal narratives when they are experiences that the reader has not had before, but try to reframe them in a less personal and authoritative light when the reader has most likely had similar experiences and already formed his own ideas about them. Instead of forcing the reader to completely reshape his worldview, we should try to open his eyes to a larger one by sharing new experiences.

I was very happy with the conclusion I came to about sharing our narratives with our readers. In my rough draft, I was unsure exactly what I was trying to say; I knew that I wanted to make the point that personal experiences could be authoritative, but I didn’t know how to revise Corder’s claim about sharing personal narratives or make the distinction between experiences that the readers had never had and those that were already familiar to them.

In terms of things that I still need to work on, I just hope that my logic made sense and that my paper was easy to follow; it all makes sense in my head, but I don’t know if that always translates onto paper. Thank you for reading!

Sincerely,

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Revised Essay 1

Sharing Stories and Avoiding Authority: Wallace’s Rhetorical Strategy

We typically think of argumentation as being adversarial in nature. When our beliefs and values come into question, we often perceive the other party as an opponent – a challenger whose arguments must be debunked, whose point of view must be invalidated in order to justify our own. In his paper “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love,” Jim Corder suggests that we arguers should “learn to abandon [these] authoritative positions” (29). Instead of relying on logic and careful reasoning, our arguments should be based on love. By demonstrating empathy and trying to “view matters both as the arguer sees them and as others see them” (31), the argument enables the two parties to “break into mutuality” (28).

As writers familiar with the conflict and friction that disagreements so often sow, Corder’s teachings offer a kinder, more empathetic approach to argumentation. We see this type of argument in action in David Foster Wallace’s essay “Consider the Lobster,” which addresses the question of whether it’s morally acceptable to boil lobsters alive – but does Wallace’s approach truly follow the Corderian model of “rhetoric as love”? Wallace’s argument is certainly an empathetic one, but the way he executes it is not exactly consistent with the strategy that Corder recommends.

Corder suggests that our form of argumentation, as a means of crafting this “loving” ethos, should involve sharing our personal narratives. An argument, he maintains, “is not something *to present* or *to display*. It is something *to be*… Our narratives are the evidence we have of ourselves and of our convictions” (26). They explain how we came to be who we are today – and in that sense, “each of us is an argument” (18).

Although Wallace consistently demonstrates empathy for his audience – reassuring them that he, too, has “an obvious selfish interest” when it comes to eating animals, since he “likes[s] to eat certain kinds of animals and want[s] to be able to keep doing it” (253) – he also *hides* from his reader in a number of ways, choosing not to reveal certain elements of the personal narrative that Corder urges us to share.

In one instance, Wallace discusses the method of lobster boiling in such detail that he could only have performed the task himself, but frames it in such a way that his role in the incident is minimized. He writes:

The basic scenario is that we come in from the store and make our little preparations like getting the kettle filled and boiling, and then we lift the lobsters out of the bag… If you’re tilting it from a container into the steaming kettle, the lobster will sometimes try to cling to the container’s sides or even to hook its claws over the kettle’s rim… (248)

Why the “we”? Why the generic “you”? The anecdote seems the perfect opportunity to share some personal reflections – e.g., “I watched in horror as the lobster tried to claw its way out of the kettle” – but Wallace chooses to remove himself from the picture entirely.

In moments that have the potential to be extremely up-close and personal, Wallace seems to slip away, retreating quietly into the anonymity of collective pronouns and public frames of reference. Even when describing how he watched the lobsters piled up in their tanks, he withdraws himself from the picture, writing:

In any event, at the MLF, standing by the bubbling tanks outside the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker, watching the fresh-caught lobsters pile over one another, wave their hobbled claws impotently, huddle in the rear corners, or scrabble frantically back from the glass as you approach, it’s difficult not to sense that they’re unhappy… (252)

For a first-hand account of the Main Lobster Festival, Wallace exerts a surprising amount of effort downplaying the personal aspect of his experience. It’s never “when I was standing at the stove,” but rather “standing at the stove” (251) – not “I left the kitchen altogether,” but “some cooks… leave the kitchen altogether” (248).

So why does he do this? Why bother to hide at all, if what Corder says is true, and sharing our personal narrative helps writer and reader come to mutual understanding?

I propose an amendment to Corder’s theory: that sharing our personal narratives *can* be beneficial to an argument – but only in certain situations. The truth is that, in other situations, sharing personal experiences can actually produce an authoritative stance – “a prison both to us and to any audience” (Corder 29) – as if the author sees his experiences as more significant or meaningful than those of the reader. Anecdotal evidence assumes that an audience will be willing to grant another’s experiences the same standing as their own, and in most cases that simply isn’t true. People are naturally inclined to believe – if only subconsciously – that our own experiences take precedence, and contradictory experiences can often seem like “your word against mine” situations.

In Wallace’s case, the sharing of personal details – of intimate emotions, such as the guilt caused by inflicting pain on another sentient creature – might have been perceived as morally self-righteous, something which Wallace makes a conscious effort to avoid.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So what are these “certain situations” in which sharing a personal narrative is of benefit? The answer is that it is beneficial to share a personal narrative when your experiences are completely different from anything your audience has experienced. It is detrimental when your experiences are the same or similar, and your sharing of them only highlights the differences in the ways you reacted to the situations at hand.

The readers of *Gourmet* magazine, for example, have probably boiled lobsters before. If Wallace had chosen to depict the scene in front of the stove in a more personal light, he likely would have come across as self-righteous, as if he wanted to make the readers feel guilty about not feeling the same way he did when confronted with the sight of a lobster scrambling to escape a kettle of boiling water. “*I’ve* boiled a lobster before, and *I* didn’t have any moral compunctions about it,” one can imagine a reader thinking to him or herself. “But why should I have to feel the same way about it? I’m my own person, and this is America, gosh darn it!”

The key here is that the writer’s job when sharing his or her personal narrative is not to *reshape* the reader’s current worldview but to open his eyes to a larger one by sharing new experiences. Martin Luther King makes use of this in his “Letter to Birmingham Jail,” in which he catalogues the many trials and tribulations of black Americans:

…when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television… when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?” (4)

Because the clergymen never encountered the sort of bigotry that King had to endure, the sharing of personal experience here is a valuable tool. Wallace makes use of it, too, when he foregrounds his thinking – his experience working through this moral dilemma. Most people prefer to deal with the issue by not thinking about it at all, and certainly not to the extent that Wallace does in his essay. Knowing that his audience has not given the matter much thought, Wallace here does nothing to conceal the personal side of his story. He openly shares his feelings on the subject, writing:

Is it possible that future generations will regard our present agribusiness and eating practices in much the same way we now view Nero’s entertainments or Mengele’s experiments? My own initial reaction is that such a comparison is hysterical, extreme – and yet the reason it seems extreme to me appears to be that I believe animals are less morally important than human beings; and when it comes to defending such a belief, even to myself, I have to acknowledge that… I have an obvious selfish interest… (253)

Corder writes that “beyond any speaker’s bound inventive world lies another” (29), and that rhetoric must create “a world full of space and time that will hold our diversities” (31). By sharing experiences that are strange and unfamiliar to the reader, the writer can expand the reader’s world and open his eyes to a new way of seeing; at the same time, he can avoid coming across as authoritative or self-righteous by reframing experiences that *are* familiar to the reader in a more impersonal light. In this way, a writer can craft loving arguments the way Corder envisioned them, bringing the reader into a world of greater understanding.

Works Cited

Corder, Jim. “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love.” *Rhetoric Review* 4.1 (1985): p. 16-32. Print.

Wallace, David Foster. “Consider the Lobster.” *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*

p. 235-254. Print.

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

/s/ Hannah Hirsh

1. More than once, Wallace makes a point of positioning himself in contrast to the extremists, disclaiming that he is “not trying to give you a PETA-like screed here” (253). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)